

*The*  
**P-TOWN**  
MURDERS



A *Bradford Fairfax* MURDER MYSTERY



*Jeffrey Round*



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A BRADFORD FAIRFAX MURDER MYSTERY

**JEFFREY ROUND**



*Cormorant Books*

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*For Shane*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*In every drop of water is the ocean.*

**BUDDHIST PROVERB**

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

# 1

In a place that's to "die for," no one expects to die for real. At least that's what Bradford thought as he hung up the phone.

The news came just past midnight, the operator's voice twanging over the line: *You have a collect call from Provincetown, Massachusetts.* He'd almost declined the charges when he heard the caller's unfamiliar name. Something made him change his mind.

A throaty voice came over the wire, a cross between Tina Turner and Divine, as though its owner gargled with razor blades.

"Bradford Fairfax?"

"Yes."

"I thought you should know Ross Pretty died of an overdose of ecstasy last night. No one's claimed the body."

The caller clicked off.

Brad felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. He crumpled onto the bed, gripping the edge of the mattress with his hands. *Ross dead!* It was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

It seemed inconceivable, yet somehow strangely inevitable given Ross's lifestyle. *Just crammin' on life*, he'd say with a grin. And in his day there'd been no one more alive: drugs, circuit parties and a sex life to make even Bill Clinton nervous. But all

good parties came to an end, Bradford knew. Better to go when they asked *Why are you leaving?* rather than *Why aren't you leaving?*

Brad and Ross had met under the laser lights at a Miami Black-and-Blue ball, surrounded by hordes of Electro-Twinks and Day-Glo Boys with their incredible bodies and their even more incredible pasts. At first glance, Brad dismissed Ross as just one more insecure boy with an irresistible physique and a sweet smile. He was so shy he could hardly catch your eye until you tumbled into bed with him. That's when he came alive and the real Ross emerged — playful, fun-loving and totally in control.

A natural-born hedonist, Ross made sure he got his nickel's worth of pleasure from life. He was a high-flying dancer whose feet seldom touched the ground. Men of all types and social statures sought his company. He was almost never without a companion. Still, it couldn't make up for the lost childhood, the love and acceptance he craved but seldom found, and the family that denied him to this day.

Ross was one of J.M. Barrie's Lost Boys who somehow found himself in a Eugene O'Neill play cast alongside monster parents, abusive siblings and broken dreams. It would be wrong to say Ross resented his family, but in trying to love them he'd paid a huge price.

His was a tale of sadness and loss, of trying too hard to be loved — a cliché but for the fact that Ross had lived through it and come out the other side scarred and mangled, but still hungry for everything life offered. That hunger was what he and Brad had in common — that and having no family to turn to. Ross had possessed the body of a Michelangelo and the face of a Caravaggio. It was ironic to think that in life almost everyone wanted him, but in death no one had turned up to claim him.

And no one would, unless Bradford did.

He went to the bar and poured himself a glass of sherry. Why, he wondered, had it happened now? He stared into the glass as though the answer might lie there. Would Ross still be alive now if Brad hadn't ended things between them? But that was unlikely. Ross was already a wild thing when they met. Courtesy demanded he be returned to the wild when Brad was done with him. To keep him in a cage — even a cage built of love — would have been unfair. Ross was already beginning to look like a captive bird when Brad had let him go. Still, he ached to think of it.

After their split, Brad couldn't understand why Ross stayed in places like P-Town when he had the entire world at his disposal. In the city, a good-looking kid could always find another lover and settle down, no matter what his past. But Ross stuck to resort towns where nothing lasted beyond a week or two, and whatever bonds you made were broken sooner rather than later. The truth was that connections scared Ross. It was as if he preferred the certainty of heartbreak and impermanence to a chance at something better.

Ross's family wouldn't show, of course. Brad was sure of that. The parents who shunned him in life wouldn't embrace him in death. This was one prodigal son who'd never return home. Ross's real life had been with Bradford and his chosen band of brothers and sisters in those few years they'd spent together. Ross had known they would never desert him, shooting star that he was, hell-bent on burning through life before it burnt him. The real question, Brad realized, wasn't why Ross had died so soon, but why he hadn't died sooner.

He glanced in the mirror. There were bags under his eyes already, and it would be another sleepless night. Time for a refill

on the cucumber cream moisturizer. Brad shook his head at his reflection. Shallow even in grief, he chided himself. Then again, only he knew how much he'd miss Ross.

He picked up the phone. As the number connected he lifted the edge of his T-shirt, revealing the rippled abs he'd been working on. Few would know the hours of sweaty labour they demanded. With one finger, he traced the graceful outline of a pair of tattooed wings emerging from the waistband of his sweat-pants. And few would know about those, either, apart from the handful of men who got close enough to see for themselves once or twice.

The face ... well, the face was okay. As long as you appreciated the occasional freckle and more than a hint of red hair, that is. In a bar recently someone had told him he was Abercrombie & Fitch material, but the guy was probably just trying to get laid. You couldn't trust a compliment these days.

A voice came over the line. "Yes?"

"Red here. I need to speak with Grace."

Brad waited while the operator checked the list for his name. He wouldn't find it.

"This is an unscheduled call, Agent Red ..."

"I know. I've got a problem."

"One moment."

The line hummed while the call transferred. As he waited he wondered about the others who called this number. What were their names? Yellow, Blue, and Violet? Or perhaps Red was indicative of his hair colour. He hoped not. Maybe the others were known simply as numbers. *How's it goin', 87!* he imagined calling out to some colleague in a dim bar somewhere.

A familiar smoky voice came on the line. "Yes, Red?"

“I’ve got to go away for a couple days.”

“Reason?”

“Death in the family.”

He’d never lied to Grace before, but Ross *was* family. He’d come to seem like a delinquent younger brother after their affair ended. And even though they hadn’t seen each other in almost a year, Ross still called once a month to let Brad know how he was, where he was: Key West, Frisco, Vallarta ... wherever there were wild parties and good times to be shared with delicious, sexy men.

Brad could barely keep up with Ross’s globetrotting, but he’d been glad to know the kid was enjoying himself. And when there wasn’t a job as barkeep to fuel his constant movement, there was bound to be a rich man somewhere in a background that got shadowier and shadowier with each passing destination.

*Time to think of coming home and settling down for a while, don’t you think?* Brad would ask every other call, testing the waters. *Always time to think of it*, Ross would reply with a laugh. *But doing it’s for old age*. They both knew it would never happen.

On the other end of the line now, Grace drew a breath. “New York’s too important for us to take any chances, Red. I should check with the folks upstairs.”

“This won’t interfere with plans,” Brad insisted. “I’ll only be gone a couple days, and then I can get to New York on schedule.”

He held his breath and prayed Grace wouldn’t turn him down. He couldn’t abandon Ross again. Not now. Not this time! The thing he hated most about his line of work — the only thing, in fact — was being told what he could and couldn’t do with his personal life. He’d had to bite his tongue more than once on being informed he wasn’t allowed to date just anyone.

The men Bradford liked were of a type: rough, tough and hirsute — what used to be called “Trade.” Grace didn’t like Trade. *We chose you because you look young and innocent*, she’d reminded him. *And we expect you to play the part.*

That meant dreary dinner parties with preppie couples and self-absorbed career fags who thought *Rent* was the epitome of culture. Try talking about the glories of Nina Simone’s dusky baritone, a portrait by Modigliani, or the exquisite delicacies of a Scriabin *étude*, and those wimps Grace approved of just stared as though you’d said you’d gone to the moon. Or farther.

He could feel her deliberating on the other end, followed by a sigh. “All right, Red,” she conceded. “But check in with me when you get there. We’ve got to keep you on schedule.”

“Thanks. You’re the best, Gracie dear.”

“*Red!*” The tone caught him short.

“Yes?” He was deferential.

“This is very serious business. We’re counting on you to come through next week.”

“I hear you.”

She paused.

“I certainly hope so.”

BRADFORD LOVED THE P-Town ferry. He preferred it to flying over the harbour or taking the winding drive along the cape. There was nothing like seeing a humpback whale break through the shimmering water right beside you to make you feel totally alive.

The first time he’d made the crossing — or *almost* made the crossing, as it turned out — the wind had picked up twenty minutes out into the open sea and the boat began to rock ominously.

After another ten minutes the windows and second-floor deck were awash in spray.

Before long, most of the passengers were hugging refuse barrels or clinging to table legs bolted to the floor. The acrid smell of vomit filled the cabin. Brad had sought refuge in the open air on the top deck where his sole companion was a young Asian girl. They'd sat and shared a bag of nachos while the others suffered unspeakable torments below.

The swells grew and the crossing deteriorated until the ship was forced to turn back. Undeterred, Brad grabbed a seat on a bus and endured the long ride across the peninsula that curled back toward the mainland like a scorpion's tail. Despite the inauspicious introduction, it would be the first of many trips to P-Town.

It was another three years before he attempted a second crossing. Ross was with him then. It was Ross's first time in P-Town and the experience had just about blown his mind. *This is the gayest place on earth!* he'd declared, watching men holding hands with other men, and women interlocking arms with women right there on the streets. *It's even gayer than Disney World!*

They'd spent the first night together, and then Ross disappeared for the next three. Eventually he returned, looking well used and more than a little satisfied. Brad had been jealous — it was his nature — but he knew he couldn't offer Ross anything others couldn't provide just as easily. He also knew the two of them had reached the end of the line as a couple, though not for the usual reasons.

For a year or more, under the nickname Icarus, Brad had been spending his spare time on an Internet site called *Brunch on Ideas*. BOI was a forum for heated political discussions, both

domestic and international. It brought out a real fervour in the chatters, who returned again and again to the site. And despite its acronym, BOI wasn't particularly gay.

A typical evening brought together hundreds of differing voices from across the continent, and farther: *Hey, all you politicians! Houston here. It's a hundred-and-ten degrees outside. Barbies are melting!* came the report from a regular nicknamed Billy D.

*Hey, Billy D — Icarus here,* Bradford responded. *Good to hear from you. I'm in a somewhat cooler place, myself.*

*London checking in,* chimed an eager voice calling itself Lola. *Anybody for a discussion of the relative merits of Bush and Gore?*

*Lola, you're all wet,* came a swift reply with a New York moniker. *Gore will trounce Bush and the world will never hear about that Texan half-wit again.*

*Lay off Texas, Yankee!* Billy D. retorted. *I think Bush is gonna win!*

Despite rumours of eavesdropping by security organizations, the chatters freely discussed any and all topics: how to sneak into Cuba, Saddam Hussein, Hilary Clinton's sexuality. Here, the forbidden was everyday. They even joked about the likelihood of secret surveillance. *Smile for the camera,* someone was sure to say to remind them of the presence of electronic snoopers.

The discussions lasted for hours. Brad often found himself at the centre of the talks, frequently accepting the role of moderator at the group's request. When most of the others had given up and gone back to the real world, a semi-regular known as Dedalus continued to engage him. At first, Dedalus seemed to be goading him, prodding for his point of view, which he always gave with unfailing politeness. Later, Brad realized Dedalus had

been drawing him out. What he couldn't know was that Dedalus had been tracking him.

It would have shocked Brad to learn his nickname appeared frequently in surveillance scans by the National Security Agency's "Project Echelon." With its high-speed artificial intelligence programs, Echelon intercepted and sifted through billions of private messages every day. NSA relied on the disbelief of most Internet users that such operations could actually occur. It was Big Brother, big time, all the time.

No one was safe. Joke about a possible assassination of George W. Bush by Osama bin Laden, and Echelon red-flagged you. Get fancy and encode it as a pun — a secret wish to see the "Shrub" end up in the "Trash Bin," for example — and you might make a terrorist alert list.

As Icarus, Brad was well-known to the NSA, which eavesdropped on BOI's chat rooms. Grace, a.k.a. Dedalus, didn't approve of the NSA, but she wasn't above eavesdropping as well. Grace soon began to consider Bradford Fairfax a worthy candidate for her own security organization, one that was nameless. It was a secret eye in an invisible door.

Grace contacted Bradford, told him he could do great things for the world, and made him an offer. Then she left him to think about it.

At the time, Brad was a freelance journalist specializing in world affairs. He had few close friends and, apart from Ross, no immediate family. He'd been made a ward of the state at fifteen when his father was killed in a car crash. His mother had died eleven years earlier. As far as Brad knew, he had no living blood relatives. For him to disappear from view completely wouldn't take much.

Brad thought over Grace's offer for a month before agreeing to join. Once he'd made his decision, the rest fell quickly in line. Leaving his old life behind wasn't an issue, but he knew it would change him forever. Any sort of personal commitment would be impossible. It was why he'd chosen to set Ross free in Provincetown.

That had been five years ago.